

# The thrill of Greek

Matthew Adams

The international superstar scholar of the late fifteenth century was, without doubt, Erasmus. Born in Holland, this polymath spent his lifetime travelling and teaching, mainly Latin and Greek: so great was his love for the classical languages – Greek particularly – that he preferred to spend what little money he had on Greek texts. ‘As soon as I get some money,’ he declared, ‘I shall first of all buy some Greek books, and then some clothes.’ The thought of a half-naked Dutchman grasping his Sophocles brings tears to the eyes. But Erasmus did not always have things his own way. ‘My Greek studies are almost too much for my courage,’ he wrote in 1500, sentiments which have been shared by many a pupil since, ‘while I have not the means of purchasing books nor the help of a master’.

This was surely a marvellous era in which to teach, and to study, classics. Latin, the language of the Romans and their Mediterranean empire, was still, 1000 years after the fall of Rome, the common language of a Europe whose many tongues, dialects, and languages were as yet unsettled: consequently, educated men (and, occasionally, women) chose to write, teach, and speak in Latin. A scholar from England could meet with a scholar from France, and be able, indeed expected, to argue and discuss in pure Latin. Before now, Greek had been practically unknown, taught and studied in the eastern Mediterranean, but almost forgotten in the west. The Renaissance in Italy restored Greek studies to a welcoming Europe; and with the introduction of Greek in England, a short time before the reign of Henry VIII, scholars and students alike rushed to devour this exciting, and radical, new language.

Yes, radical. This was a period of fresh literature reaching western Europe. Greek was the new wine, and everybody wanted to drink it. Incredible though it might seem today, at the beginning of the sixteenth century this language was in universal demand, and demand was outstripping supply. In order to acquaint themselves with this language, scholars hurried from all over Europe to whichever centres were teaching Greek. Erasmus himself visited England solely to learn Greek – English Greek was as good as anything being taught in Italy, or even in Greece itself – and he was clearly impressed by what he saw. In a letter from Oxford, dated 4th December 1497, he wrote:

*There is so much learning going on here, of erudite, old-fashioned and scholarly Latin and Greek, that I hardly care about going to Italy, except for the sake of having been there.*

A generation later the students in Oxford were devouring the new literature. An eyewitness wrote in 1520: ‘The students rush to Greek lectures, they endure watching, fasting, toil, and they go hungry in pursuit of their Greek studies.’ Can this be true, that students actually ran to get to their Greek lessons in time? That they went without food in order to spend their money on the purchase of Greek books? Yes, for Greek was an exciting, new, and dangerous subject: Greek was devoured by the young, by poets, by historians, by political thinkers, by champions of liberty, and by all who felt oppressed. The traditionalists condemned it for its subversive potential, and the establishment tried to ban this seditious, dangerous language, while the young read swathes of it for the same reason. Greek ideals on the overthrow of tyranny and on freedom for the individual astonished sixteenth-century England, and the authorities watched in fear and trepidation, waiting for the rebellion that was to come. (In fact, the great school rebellions were not to happen for another 250 years, but that is another story.)

The study of Greek progressed, and what was learnt in the universities filtered down into the schools. In 1528 Erasmus again could show just how far English schools had advanced in the teaching of Greek, when he wrote of English boys entertaining themselves by ‘chattering away in delightful Greek epigrams’. Schools were introducing Greek onto the timetable as fast as they possibly could – the Renaissance equivalent of Citizenship Studies? Evidence for its introduction exists in the founding statutes, as well as in contemporary diaries and letters. For example, the founder of St Paul’s School, London, John Colet, demanded in his statutes that the schoolmaster of his new school should be ‘learned in good and clean Latin, and also in Greek’, while the children should be taught ‘good literature, both Latin and Greek’. And fifty years later, Sir Thomas Pope, founder of Trinity College, Oxford, wrote: ‘I remember when I was a young scholar at Eton, the study of Greek was very popular.’

Exploring the history of classical studies can be a fascinating journey, and often helps to put into perspective contemporary attitudes to teaching classics. Greek arrived in Britain very much later than Latin, and this is the reason why, even today, Greek is almost always taught as a second language, after Latin. Finally, those who, like Erasmus, sometimes find that their Greek studies are almost too much for their courage, can take heart at a quotation from the sermon of Dean Gaisford, preacher at Christ Church, Oxford, on Christmas Day, 1800. After a lengthy address on moral rectitude, he finished by giving his congregation the following advice:

*In conclusion, I cannot do better than impress upon you the study of Greek literature, which not only elevates above the vulgar herd, but leads not infrequently to positions of considerable emolument.*

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